Varsal

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The day had not yet broken when Parvati finished weaving the last bit of the reed matting. For the last four days she'd been hurrying through her household chores and whenever she found some time to spare, she'd busy herself with this dali that was twelve footsteps wide and about twenty-four footsteps in length.

Ever since her husband died she'd made it a point to sell her wares at the bazaar that was held at Dussehra. Four pairs of winnowing fans hung from the hook on the wall. If only she could weave another dali in time, Parvati throught wistfully, but she'd have to gather the wild reeds herself and carry the bundles home on her head. Then there was so much more to be done. The reeds would have to be split, the outer skin removed. Her only son Madhu had stopped helping her these days. Not that he ever hung around wasting time, his mornings were spent in school and in the evenings he'd do odd jobs so that he could earn enough to pay for his schooling.

Parvati picked up the knife and sickle and brushed off the bits of reed that had fallen on her clothes. She rolled up the length of matting and propped it up on the porch - how white and spotless it looked, just like a plantain stem that had been freshly peeled.

Cracks had formed on the walls of this two-roomed mud hut that had been built by the government some four or five years ago. Parvati's eyes kept straying to the cracks through which the sunlight filtered into the room. Must fill them up with mud paste today, she resolved, peering into the vessel on the hearth. These children haven't left me even a mouthful of tea, she grumbled,

pouring some fresh water into the vessel and lighting a fire in the hearth. Suddenly she heard someone calling her name. Tilgo Bhavdi? What was he doing here, she wondered, hurrying to the door and sure enough, there he was in the courtyard with a *dholak* in his hand.

'Come Bhavdi, sit.'

'No... must go. Just came to give you this drum. It's your family's turn to beat the drum at the temple festivals. The earnings from Dussehra onwards will be yours.'

Tilgo Bhavdi placed the *dholak* and the stick on the verandah and turned to go.

'Wait! Have some tea...'

'No, no. Must go and cut some reeds', and soon Bhavdi was gone.

Parvati ran her hand slowly over the drum. They would not lack for food this year, she thought. On festivals like the Chavoth and the Shigmo nearly a hundred and fifty coconuts would pile up in their hut as they went from door to door beating on the dholak and receiving alms. Each farmer would give them a measure of paddy and receiving alms. Each farmer would give them a measure of paddy when they went to the threshing flour after the harvest. They wouldn't have to worry about rice this year. They would also get some money. There would be time to weave a few baskets and boxes and when these were sold, there would be some money. She exuded happiness and excitement as her mind floated lightly like the blossoms of the wild grass in the wind.

The *varsal*, the right to earn money by beating the drum on ceremonial occasions, had come to their family four times since the day she got married and not once during those years did they have to borrow a measure of rice or run up a list of debts at the village shop. Happy in her thoughts, Parvati quite forgot the vessel of tea bubbling on the hearth till the brew had quite evaporated and she had to make the tea all over again.

'Avai, whose drum is this?' Mangal asked her mother when she and her brother Madhu got back home from school.

'Ours. We will get the *varsal* this year. Tilgo Bhavdi said so when he brought it over this morning.'

'May I play on it?'

'Mad child! Girls aren't allowed to play the drum.'

'Who'll play it, then?'

'Your brother will. This year your brother will play the *dholak* all over the village.'

'Yes? Then I'll go with him whenever he plays.'

Parvati's thoughts went back to the days when her husband was alive. Madhu would insist on following his father all around the village and they would tramp from door to door playing on the drum on festive days.

'Yes. You can go with your brother this year, and whatever money you collect is yours. Now go and see where Madhu is.' The girl flitted away like a butterfly, quite beside herself with joy.

'What is it, Avai?' Madhu called out from the edge of the courtyard.

'Come here..., listen...'

'What is it?'

'The varsal has come to us this year. Tilgo Bhavdi brought the *dholak* over this morning. Day after tomorrow is Dussehra and you have to play the drum in the temple. Take it to Yashyadada and get it tuned.'

Madhu listened to everything that mother said in silence but made no move to do as he was told. He remained standing like a post in the courtyard.

'Aren't you going? When will you go then? There's only one day left...'

'Don't tell me to do any such thing.'

'Not tell you? Who'll beat the dholak this year, then?'

'I won't. Ask someone else.'

'Who else is there? If your father were alive would I be pleading with you?'

'Tell me to do anything else and I will. But I won't sling that *dholak* round my neck!'

'Don't talk like that! A few coconuts will pile up in this hut... we'll get some paddy. We can eat a few meals in peace. And the villagers will be angry, otherwise.'

'Let them! Let them abuse us if they want to... but I'm not going to lay that stick on that drum!' Madhu didn't wait to

speak any more as he strode down the little track that led past their hut.

Parvati's body seemed to shrink into itself as she sank down to the ground, her head spun and she could barely think.

'What will happen now?' she sighed helplessly. Dussehra was just two days away. May be someone would beat the drum for her this time if she pleaded hard enough, but what would happen during the festivals that came after this? No, she couldn't let this happen, Madhu would have to beat the drum!

Parvati rose to her feet painfully and lowered the drum from its peg on the wall and set off for Yashyadhada's hut.

'What are you doing here? With the *dholak* too, I see.' Yashyadada was busy stripping the outer layer off a pile of reeds.

'The varsal has come to us this year. Won't you tune this drum for me?'

'Why? Can't Madhu do that? Big as a horse he's become!'

'He's not interested he says...'

'Not interested? But he has to be!'

'Who knows what is wrong with the boy. When I talk about the varsal he says he won't touch that drum! Talk to him.'

'Who listens to anything I say... but I'll try, if I see him.'

'Yashyadada fiddled with the cords on the drum and beat on it with his fingers to test the sound. Parvati hurried back to her hut and slung the drum on the peg on the wall.

She took out the packages she had brought from the bazaar and handed some eatables to the children. Madhu was sitting astride a bench, immersed in his books. He was in the twelfth class this year, and very serious about his work. Mangala sat beside him turning the pages of her books too.

'Babu, you'll beat the drum this year, won't you?' Parvati went up to him, her voice betraying concern. Madhu tore his eyes away from the page and stared at his mother for a moment before turning away again.

'Don't do this, babu, the *varsal* is our birthright. The right to earn that money will slip out of our hands, otherwise...'

'So what?'

'But that is our livelihood!'

'There are other ways to earn money too.'

'The villagers will be angry with us. They won't come to our aid when we are in trouble.'

'We don't need them!'

'Who has taught you to talk like this?'

'This book has!' Madhu's voice rose angrily as he tossed the book on the bench.

'Set fire to those books of yours!'

'Set fire to those villagers instead! And all their talk about traditions and duties! They look down on us as people of lower birth. 'Mhaddo! Mhaddo!', they taunt us. Go tell them that Shanker Mhara's son will not beat the drums!'

Madhu's anger at his mother and at the villagers erupted in a torrent of words. He remembered how the villagers used to beat his father with the very sticks with which he pounded on the drum. Seeing her brother unleash his fury on their mother, Mangal began to tremble in fear.

Today is Dussehra. Hundreds of people will assemble at the temple. Drums will pound. Flags will flutter. The Divine Spirit will enter the body of the Oracle. People will gather the leaves of the holy tree in a symbolic recreation of an incident in the Mahabharata. A wave of joy will inundate the people. All this is true, but why haven't the musicians reached the temple yet? The village elders bustle about in concern.

'Now where has that mhaddo gone?'

'Someone go and see where that wretch is stuck.'

'Arrey, at least find out whose *varsal* it is, who is the once who has to beat the drums.'

'Appa, the boy says he won't be the *varsal*, he won't beat the drum', Parvati pushed through the crowd and addressed the village headman in timid tones.

'What? Won't beat the drum? Do you want to stay in this village or not?'

It was already way beyond the time when the ceremonial flag should have been hoisted and now this confusion about the musicians had cropped up! Appi Ganvkar vent his anger on Parvati as she stood there without another word.

'Rajgya, come here! Fetch that *dholak* from Parvati's house and play the drum. Let the *varsal* be yours!'

Rajgo could barely hide his joy. The *varsal* had fallen to his lot for the first time in his life and his face was flushed with happiness at the thought of his good fortune! But Parvati was miserable. What was theirs by right had slipped out of their grasp. She turned away sadly and set off home. Rajgo followed her down the track, his lame foot dragging in the dust.

Madhu was sitting on the porch, leaning against the wall. Parvati went up the steps and grabbed the *dholak* that hung from the peg on the wall. She handed it to Rajgo without a word. He took the drum and set off down the track that led to the temple. Parvati stared at the *dholak* tucked under his arm till he disappeared from her sight. The *varsal* had now slipped away from them once and for all, she realised, her heart filled with remorse.

Presently, the sound of pounding drums filled the air above the temple. Each drum beat seemed to tear at her heart like the strokes of the sickle tore the wild reeds. Now the Holy Spirit will enter the body of the Oracle. A sense of utter hopelessness weighed her down.

Madhu reaslised that his mother was very upset and, slowly, he went to her side. For a second he wondered if he should have done what she had asked him to, but he soon forced the thought out of his mind.

'Avai, why do you cry? For the *varsal*?'

'Yes, my son.' Parvati couldn't hold back her sobs.

'Avai, don't be upset. You Madhu will earn a living, just see, but he won't bow his head before anyone.'

Her son's words seemed to soothe Parvati. Her mind, which had sunk under the weight of so much care, grew light again as she gazed lovingly at the boy.

Madhu went into the hut. He cast an eye over the tools and implements that had been laid out for worship the previous day. Picking up the sickle, he strode out into the courtyard and started working on the wild reeds that had been put out to dry.

Translated from the Konkani by Vidya Pai